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Chaperoning in genitourinary medicine: supporting patients and protecting doctors

I read with interest the result of the postal survey regarding chaperoning in genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.¹ The notable observation is that female patients were offered a chaperone far more often than males (on all occasions when the examiner was a male (32/32) and frequently when the examiner was a female (13/40)). Chaperoning was offered less frequently when the patient was a male with a female examiner (7/37) and infrequently with a male examiner (3/39).

GUM nurses and doctors are particularly vulnerable because the open access of the services exposes them to situations where they have no prior knowledge of the patient's background, social, behavioural, psychological, or mental state. The vulnerability is accentuated by the fact that sexual history and intimate examination are part of the routine clinical assessment in most of the situations. This vulnerability was called into a course of action in our clinic in 1996 when a senior male clinical assistant was a recipient of allegations (from a male patient in his 50s). The clinical assistant was nearing retirement, after an unblemished long service in general practice, with over 20 years' experience as an assistant in GUM. The patient expressed extremes of behaviour, grandiose imagination, and swings of mood, which became a reason for clinical concern. The concerns were raised with the patient's general practitioner (GP) who advised that the patient suffered problems with alcoholism and was undergoing mental rehabilitation, and that he would attend the patient's condition urgently at home. The GP telephoned the clinic later to indicate that the patient had recovered from his episode and he would like to speak with the consultant GU physician. The patient offered a clear and strong apology regarding what he described as "inappropriate course of behaviour and action" and reiterated that his initial allegations against the senior clinical assistant were, in all, unsafe and untrue.

The incident of false allegations has proved the particular vulnerability of doctors and nurses in the GUM clinic setting. A review of the procedures of chaperoning in the GUM clinic was conducted. The clinic then introduced a system of guidelines whereby all clinical examinations and tests are done in the presence of a chaperone (irrespective of the sex of the patient or the examiner). The nursing staff have realised and appreciated the benefits of attendance to support the

patients and to assist the doctors (during the clinical examination and tests). The time spent in the clinical room proved useful in the preparation and labelling of samples. Gaining knowledge about the clinical assessment of clients proved to be valuable to nurses during health advising. The application of the named nurse procedures has meant that the attending nurse would follow the patient all through the clinical assessment, microscopic tests, the introduction of treatment/therapy, and health advising thereafter. This continuity of care is more acceptable to the patient and more satisfactory to the nursing staff.

The issue of funding for chaperoning could be argued under the remit of professional safety. Professionals in other services take stringent methods to protect themselves from what could be less dangerous and damaging situations to their professional careers. Therefore, chaperoning in GUM must be viewed in the light of providing support to patients and protection to staff.

A R Markos

Mid Staffordshire General Hospitals NHS Trust,
Staffordshire General Hospital, Weston Road,
Stafford ST16 3SA, UK; Stephanie.thorpe@
msgh-tr.wmids.nhs.uk

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STI case management at a South African teaching hospital

In South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is at the centre of the HIV epidemic and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are endemic in this province.¹ Improving the quality of STI health care causes a cost effective reduction in HIV prevalence and STI incidence.² Despite the introduction of national standard treatment guidelines (STGs), based on the syndromic management approach (where antibiotics are prescribed according to algorithms and non-medicinal aspects of care are emphasised), poor case management has been found in rural KZN clinics.³ This study determined the quality of care received by STI patients at King Edward VIII Hospital (KEH), Durban. As the province's main academic hospital, KEH has represented the best level of health care for the average citizen of KZN since 1936. Patients with STI are managed syndromically.

The drug treatment of 97 black African outpatients with STI (73% female, average age 29 years) was compared with STGs. Patients also completed a questionnaire assessing non-drug management. Drug treatment complied with STGs in 79% of patients. When assessment included non-drug measures (partner notification cards, condoms, and correct drugs) it fell to 24% compared to 9% found among nurses, with simulated patients in rural KZN clinics.³ Although overall care appears better in the urban setting, the real difference is at the level of drug treatment (where 79% v 41% received recommended drugs), as in both cases only about a quarter of the patients who had correct drug treatment also received appropriate non-drug care. Patients had appropriate counselling in 56% of cases. This was measured in terms of receiving at least one message in each of the five categories shown in table 1. Despite 72% of patients being encouraged to use condoms, 52 patients were not shown how to do this. Of these, only 31 knew how to use them.

Care givers were interviewed and vignettes were used to compare ideal and actual practice. Barriers to patient care and possible solutions were canvassed. All care givers gave appropriate answers for the ideal management of their fictitious case, but reported a difference between ideal management and actual practice in terms of non-drug aspects of management. All care givers failed to give drug information and to promote health seeking behaviour. Barriers to patient care were lack of time, staffing shortages, and motivation. There was a perception that non-drug management was not the responsibility of the tertiary care giver.

Care givers favoured the option of introducing a packet containing information, condoms, and a referral card, which could be issued with medication. In rural KZN a similar intervention resulted in improved case management in 83% of cases compared with a control group of 12% ($p < 0.005$).⁴ Such packets could help improve STI management in this tertiary setting, which has no dedicated STI clinic.

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C S Harries, J Botha

Department of Pharmacology, Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, University of Natal, Private Bag X7, Congella, 4013, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Table 1 Categories of patient counselling showing one important example in each category

Counselling category	Example	"Yes" response (%)	95% CI
Drug information	Told to take medicine	65	55 to 74
Partner referral	Told partner must be treated	56	45 to 66
Health seeking behaviour	Told about the signs of STI	50	39 to 60
Risk reduction	Told that STI enhances HIV risk	57	46 to 67
Condom promotion	Encouraged to use condoms	72	62 to 81